

Charlatan

By Ruth Richardson

The dark figure crept through the gloom of the grimy alley, silent as a spectre. The hem of a long coat swirled inches above the damp pavement, whispering around the tops of black leather boots as they stalked in the darkness. Their owner privately thought sometimes that the wide-brimmed black hat might be overdoing it, but it was either this or some kind of Lone Ranger mask, and he refused to sink to that level.

The door in front of which he stopped was completely invisible to any sort of normal vision, but that didn't stop him from reaching out a black-gloved hand and grasping the doorknob. Amused contempt flickered briefly over his face as the knob turned easily—and silently—in his hand. Misplaced arrogance, to not even lock the door.

The dark figure merged with the shadows, disappearing into an apparently solid brick wall.

Inside the building was as dark as the outside. Strange shapes clustered in the gloom, and in this kind of home it was a good bet that turning on a light would only make them more strange, not less. He paused just inside the door, listening to the silence that filled the room, that seemed to cover the whole house like the thickly plush carpet beneath his boots. He didn't trust that silence, just as he didn't trust the shapes of things in the room. Everything was trying to tell him that there was nothing here, that everything was perfectly normal, not at all dangerous in any

way. That alone was enough to set off internal warning bells, even if he hadn't already known what he was walking into.

He made it halfway across the room before the trap sprang, but he was expecting it and didn't flinch as brilliant lights suddenly banished the night. An iron cage slammed down around him, conjured out of thin air, but he stood calmly inside it as a voice came from behind him.

"You're either crazy or stupid, coming after me in my own home." The light tenor was full of cocksure confidence. The ironmage Marcus Trent practically swaggered into view, tying up the belt of a thick dressing gown. "I mean, you found the place, so you gotta know something, and anyone who knows anything knows that the first spell a mage casts on his own home makes anyone else's magic stop working when they come inside. That's basic security. One oh one, y'know?" Marcus looked through the bars at the trespasser, who stood impassively watching. He continued in that almost conversational tone. "Which means right now I can do just about anything I want with you, and you can't do nothing about it." The ironmage made a quick gesture, and the man in black found himself slammed against the iron bars and held there while Marcus suddenly snarled in his face. *"So you wanna give me one reason why I shouldn't just snap your friggin' neck?!"*

Silence was the only answer.

Marcus rolled his eyes and gestured again, and the man still held against the bars felt a tingle in his blood. "Fine," Marcus sneered. "Let's try again with a little truth magic. You can start with name and mage rank, then move on to just what you're doing here."

One black-gloved hand rose like a striking serpent, and Marcus staggered back from the glowing mist that flew into his face. The iron bars melted away as his concentration failed under

the burning, stinging assault, and his former prisoner seemed to suddenly shimmer and meld with the surrounding shadows. “H-how—?” he choked, staring through watering eyes at the impossible magical effect.

“To answer your questions,” the man said in a deep, growling voice, “my name is Conroy Kane. Charlatan. And I’m here for information.”

“You can’t just invade people’s homes, Conroy.” The feminine voice in his head was soft and musical—and full of reproach, but Conroy Kane didn’t even slow his stride when he heard it.

“Maybe *you* can’t, Selene,” he replied. “And I’ve told you before to stay out of my head.”

“There are rules.” The voice now seemed to come from the very moonlight that filtered through the glare of city lights. Kane naturally avoided both where he could, but now the moonlight was following him.

“Your rules, not mine,” he said shortly. “Rules for mages. I’m not.”

“You might as well be. And this is going to get around, you know. What can be so important that you’re willing to alienate the entire magical community?”

Kane had reached his car now—black, of course; low, sleek, and fast. “The Mage of Day,” he said as he opened the door and settled in. “He’s missing.”

There was a pause.

“I’m coming with you.” Selene Miles now sat in the passenger seat, her flowing white gown shaping itself out of the moonlight, her black hair from the night sky, her eyes like the stars. Determination made the beauty of her face into a hard, strong thing, like marble, and Kane knew how useful her help could be. Even aside from her skills as a moonmage, Selene was with the Special Crimes Unit of the FBI, also known as the Magic Squad. A bit of legal authority and police training could come in very handy where he was going.

Not that he was about to admit it.

“Fine,” he growled. “Just don’t get in my way.”

“Where are we?”

The towering buildings and grimy streets of the city had long since given way to swaths of lawn and high fenced walls around tamed wildernesses. The black car’s tires crunched on the gravel drive of a sprawling stone mansion.

“Trevor Montgomery’s private princedom in hell.” Kane’s voice was grim and he glared at the dark hulk with hard eyes. “The Mage of Day is in there, and according to my *good* friend Marcus, he’s not there by his own choice.”

“How could they catch him?” Selene wondered. “He’s the most powerful of us all.”

“Yes,” Kane agreed. “A very powerful man with one great big, easy weakness.” He saw her questioning look. “There’s a very rare type of obsidian crystal. When struck with iron it creates a sound that—for some reason—incapacitates the Mage of Day. It’s hard to get your hands on, but if you’ve got it...”

“But—how can we get him out? They’re sure to have a dampening spell in place. Magic won’t work in there.”

The charlatan’s smile was frightening. “Mine will.”

“You’ve got a plan?”

“I’ve always got a plan.”

Kane crouched in the shadows of an upper floor balcony, studying the movements of the six people below. Montgomery had obviously found some henchmen, although he probably called them acolytes. Whatever the title, their activities in the large, posh entrance hall were enough to tighten Kane’s jaw, and he heard Selene hiss quietly behind him as she realized what was happening.

“That’s a summoning ritual,” she breathed. “They’re calling up a demon. What are they planning?”

“Depends what kind of demon it is,” he responded equally quietly. “I don’t see any sign of him.” Kane’s sharp gaze passed over the circling, hooded figures, the burning candles, the lines on the pale marble floor painted in blood. He would have given something to know just what creature that blood had come from; it would’ve given him a better idea of what the demonmages were doing. But the Mage of Day was nowhere to be seen. He might be anywhere in this hulk—or even hidden behind one of the thick red curtains that draped the walls. It wouldn’t take anything extraordinary to hold him if they had that obsidian crystal. Still...

“He’ll be somewhere below ground,” Kane decided. “Look at this place. These people are all about image—the *cool* evil. They almost have to have some kind of dungeon.”

There was a flash of colored smoke from the floor below, and both Kane and Selene crouched deeper into the shadows.

“The question is,” Selene whispered, “what do we do about *them*?”

“Leave that to me,” Kane replied. “Your job is to get the Mage of Day into sunlight as quickly as possible.”

“*It’s nighttime!*” Selene hissed. “And I’m a moonmage.”

“There’s a full spectrum lamp in the car. That’ll do to start with,” Kane told her. “Let’s get going.”

Like a slender, pale slice of moonlight, Selene followed the silent black shadow of Conroy Kane, while behind them the demonic ritual progressed toward its climax.

In a cramped, pitch-black cell, pressed down by the weight of stone above him, Grant Dale, the Mage of Day, huddled in the dark. Iron manacles clamped his wrists, chained to the stone wall, and he had barely enough strength left to lift his hands, much less shatter the chains as he would normally have done. He tugged experimentally anyway, grasping and pulling at the rough iron with hands that felt limp as wet grass. No use. Even that slight effort made his head swim and bright sparks dance in the blackness before his eyes. He slumped back to the damp stone floor, panting for breath.

He'd been overconfident. He'd walked blindly into Montgomery's trap without pausing to fully assess the situation. Kane would never have made that kind of mistake, but then, Kane had to be over cautious to survive, up against magic that he didn't possess, with only his wits and trickery to save him. A Mage of Day didn't have that problem. Most of the time. Most of the time, Grant Dale was one of the most powerful beings on Earth, but then there had been that noise—that awful, blinding noise that seemed to shatter the whole world and stab at him with the jagged pieces. And then darkness, seeping into his soul as both light and life drained out.

He didn't even know how long he'd been held here. He didn't know how long he could survive in this impenetrable darkness.

There was a faint scratching noise. Grant opened his eyes, staring blindly. Rats? The scratching continued, then the softest fall of a booted foot and a thread of a whisper as, with a loud thunk, the door bolt slid aside. The creaking of hinges as the door opened was loud enough to make a corpse flinch in pain, and Grant wondered for a moment if this could be some new form of torment. But then a voice spoke.

“Well, so much for secrecy,” it said wryly. A tiny flashlight clicked on. “Grant?”

“Conroy!” But Grant's flash of relief was followed by an irrational surge of anger. “Conroy, what are you *doing* here?” he whispered fiercely. “You could be killed!”

Kane shook his head impatiently. “No time for that now. We've got to get you out of here.” He seized one of the manacles and attacked it with his lock pick. “Listen to me,” he muttered in a grim undertone. “They're calling a demon, and I think I know which one. Whatever happens, you mustn't fight him. No matter what, you hear me? It's what they—“

Kane's voice broke in an agonized scream as a blast of cruel magic hit him full in the back. It left him gasping in pain, crouched on his knees as a demonmage guard appeared in the cell door behind him. The guard grinned and, while Kane still huddled around the pain, hit him with a second blast.

Kane screamed again, writhing, curled on the hard stone floor, and Grant, only inches away, was helpless to protect him, to shield him. "Stop it! Leave him alone!" The words were almost a sob, more a plea than a command, and nearly drowned by Kane's screaming, but miraculously the guard did stop, at least for a moment. The demonmage grinned at the Mage of Day with a look of almost lustful anticipation.

"This filth's a friend of yours, is it?" he asked mockingly, stepping over the charlatan's body toward Grant. "Good. Maybe I'll even leave the light on so you can watch what happens to him." He was right in Grant's face now, leering, his breath stinking hot. "We've got some time before they need you upstairs, and I'm getting bored. So I'm gonna take him apart *real* slow." He licked his lips in anticipation, and Grant, staring into those pitiless eyes, shuddered in horror and disgust at what he saw there.

But the demonmage had turned his back on Conroy Kane for just a moment too long. A sudden billow of smoke filled the tiny cell, and the guard stumbled, cursing, as a single blow hit him from one side, and a taunting voice whispered, "You'll have to catch me first." The smoke swirled, slowly dissipating, and the weak beam of the dropped flashlight was just strong enough to pick out the ripple of movement as the trailing edge of Kane's long, black coat disappeared through the door.

The guard ran after him, roaring with rage. “Get back here, you cockroach! I’ll tear out your liver and feed it to you!”

And the Mage of Day was left alone, helplessly straining against the chains as the sounds of pursuit grew weaker in the distance.

Kane jumped over a railing and plunged down a flight of stairs. He hit the bottom, rolled, and came up running again. He could hear the pounding feet that pursued him; it seemed the guard had picked up some friends. Kane slowed down just a bit to be sure they didn’t lose him. He just had to keep them all focused on him for just a little longer.

Something tangled his legs in the dark, and he fell, cursing mentally. More of those stupid velvet curtains, their too-long hems dragging on the floor. It took him precious seconds to kick free and scramble up again, and now there was no danger of losing the pursuit. He ducked as the first spell shattered the wall over his head. They had him in sight now, and these rooms were dim, but not dark enough. It was only a matter of time.

The Mage of Day shuddered with effort, pulling again and again at the unyielding iron, desperate to get to Kane, to help him. He could hear the magic now, in the distance, building like a dissonant chord. He couldn’t leave Conroy to face that alone.

But it seemed he couldn’t do anything else. He was trapped in the dark, and the chain ignored all his tugging, though he pulled so hard that the blood pounded in his ears, nearly drowning out the rising magery.

“Grant?” The voice was soft, the touch on his shoulder even softer, and Grant whirled in surprise. The tiny flashlight, still laying where Kane had dropped it, gave just enough light to pick out the pale outline of—

“Selene?” Even here where her magic must be useless, she seemed to shimmer with moonlight. “How did you—?”

“Conroy isn’t the only one who can sneak around,” she said. “I came in when he went out. Guard went right past me.” As Kane had done, she took his arm and began working at the manacle’s keyhole. “He’s not the only one who can pick a lock either.” With a quiet click, the chain came free and rattled onto the stone floor. Grant cringed at the sound, but Selene ignored it. “You need to get into daylight.”

“No! We’ve got to help him,” Grant whispered hoarsely. “There’s got to be at least a dozen mages out there, plus whatever they’re calling up. Conroy can’t—!”

“Conroy is better than both of us, here,” Selene interrupted as the chain fell away from his other wrist. “He can take care of himself. His job is to be a distraction; mine is to get you out. His plan, not mine,” she added as Grant glared at her. “He knows what he’s doing. We have to trust him.”

Grant nodded grudgingly, his rational side acknowledging his own weakness, while his emotions cried out against it. “All right,” he said finally. “Get me into some light. And then I’m going to come back and take this place apart.”

Selene kept them in the dimmest, narrowest passages, working their way cautiously toward freedom through what would have been the servants' halls in different times. Light-starved as he was, even that dimness was a blessed relief to Grant, though he could now hear the dissonant buildup of magic even more clearly. It preyed on his nerves, knowing they were within touching distance of that much evil power and knowing that he couldn't do a thing to stop it. His instincts screamed at him to hurry, to run, to *do* something, and he trembled with impatience, holding himself back as they crept silently through the gloom. Up a narrow staircase, along a corridor, edging around corners, straining to catch the first sounds of pursuit. They both knew that as long as the dampening spell held, they would be no match for the demonmages if they were discovered. But Kane's distraction seemed to have worked; they saw no one.

Suddenly Grant stumbled, clutching at his head. He heard Selene gasp as an image forced itself into their minds. In a large room of candlelit marble and red velvet, two men forced Kane to his knees, holding his arms behind him. A hand tangled in his hair, jerking his head back, but he still managed a contemptuous sneer at the group of red-robed mages in the room. "You look stupid in those bathrobes," he told them. "What hotel did you steal them from?" One of them hit him hard in the lower back, and he flinched, grimacing in pain.

"I know you can hear me, Mage of Day." Trevor Montgomery's voice echoed in Grant's head, a soft tenor that nonetheless grated on his senses like nails on a chalkboard. "I understand that this—*thing*—is a friend of yours." As if on cue, a blast of white-hot sorcery slammed into Kane's chest. He convulsed, choking on screams, and when it ended he hung limp in his captors' grasp, panting for breath. "It's at least three hours before dawn," Montgomery continued. "Three hours before you'll even begin to have enough power to come back and

rescue him. Do you think we can make him beg before that?” Kane writhed in another blast of energy. “And of course there’s the Demon Nakh-Ahmen. We’ve got to give him *someone* as an offering when he arrives, and if we don’t have *you*, well...” Another blast. Kane’s agony seemed to pound directly into Grant’s head, and Selene was holding him back, the only thing keeping him from running straight back into Montgomery’s hands. “Although if we start enjoying ourselves *too* much, your friend might be dead by that time.” Grant didn’t need the telepathic link anymore. He could hear the screams echoing through the manor as sorcery stabbed at Kane again and again.

“Let me go!” Grant yelled, struggling against Selene’s grip.

“No!” she hissed back, though tears glittered in her dark eyes. “Be quiet! They’ll find us!”

“I don’t care! I can’t leave him like that!” He could still see Kane in his mind, struggling, straining against the hands that held him, the vicious magic that engulfed him.

“Grant, think!” Selene insisted. “If you go back, they’ll only kill him sooner. We have to get out if we’re going to help him. It’s his only chance!” The desperate plea in her voice finally broke through his unthinking panic as he recognized her driving determination to help Kane the only way she could—by helping Grant.

Grant closed his eyes, his face a mask of anguish as he was forced to watch his friend’s agony. Finally, he managed a shaky nod. “All right,” he said, his voice choked, barely a whisper.

Making hardly any noise at all, the moonmage and the Mage of Day made their cautious way to freedom, while in their minds the images of Kane's torture continued relentlessly on.

The car roared into life, triggered by Grant's remote while they were still yards away. Grant handed the keys to Selene and opened the passenger side door. "Drive," he said grimly. He punched a control on the dash and a console flipped up, revealing the full-spectrum light. "Drive east."

Selene climbed in beside him and gunned the engine, sending the car swerving back onto the pavement in a spray of gravel. "You know we'll come to the ocean in about half an hour, right? Going east isn't going to change much in that distance."

"Don't worry. By the time we get there, I'll be able to do something about it." Grant leaned back, soaking up the light, and his smile was as dark as his voice. "A Mage of Day doesn't just *wait* for the sun to rise."

Kane curled in on himself, fighting the screams with clenched teeth. He knew Grant, knew what he would do. All he had to do was hold on, endure for just a while longer. He huddled on the marble floor, blinded by the endless agony. He could hear the demonmages laughing.

Abruptly, all of it stopped, and Kane was left gasping, the relief so intense it was almost as overpowering as the pain had been. His vision slowly cleared, but what he saw almost made him wish it hadn't.

The demon Nakh-Ahmen looked perfectly, normally human, like anyone might pass in the street without a second glance. But anyone who bothered with that second glance would soon regret it. There was something so indefinably and potently *wrong* about him that Kane felt his gorge rising just looking at him.

“I assume you want something,” Nakh-Ahmen said to the kneeling mages. He had appeared in the center of the blood pattern on the floor—probably couldn’t cross those lines, Kane figured as he saw the mages carefully keep outside the circle. The demon looked down his nose at them. “And I assume you know my price.”

“Great Lord,” Montgomery responded, daring to look up from where he knelt. He couldn’t quite meet the demon’s eyes, though. “I’m afraid our offering is hardly worthy of your attention, much less adequate payment for the boon we had thought to earn. We *had* captured the Mage of Day for you, intending to offer him in exchange for the power to borrow mage-power from others. But *this*—“ He kicked Kane hard in the ribs. “—This helped him escape. We believe he will come back to rescue his friend, though. In the meantime, maybe you’d like this one as an appetizer?”

Nakh-Ahmen turned his gaze on Kane, sneering. Those eyes should have reduce any mere mortal to quivering terror, but Kane snarled defiance, staring down the evil power he saw there with an outraged stubbornness that abandoned fear. The demon’s eyebrow’s twitched in surprise.

“What, no magic at all?” Nakh-Ahmen’s tone tried to be dismissive, but the surprise lingered, rising toward curiosity. “And yet he outwitted a dozen demonmages. Hmm.” He

looked back to the kneeling mage. “That doesn’t say much for your skill. What if the Mage of Day doesn’t return?”

Montgomery swallowed nervously. “Then—then please accept our humble offering in apology for needlessly disturbing you.”

Nakh-Ahmen laughed, and Kane endured his considering gaze for another long moment. Finally, the demon nodded. “Agreed,” he said. “Prepare him.”

The acolytes forced Kane to kneel at the edge of the circle, held firmly between three mages, while Montgomery pushed back the sleeves of his robe. He reached into the air, scowling in concentration, and pulled a glowing golden bar out of nothing, a lance of pure magery. Kane jerked, flinching away as the mage rested the tip of the bar against the base of the charlatan’s throat—and pushed.

Kane’s body shuddered spasmodically, arching, trying to resist the magic that invaded him. He could feel it burning through his throat, choking him, pushing on through his straining muscles. Fire spread from it, carried on blood and bone, boiling in his veins and behind his wide-open eyes. When the glowing bar reached his spine, he shrieked, convulsing uncontrollably. His last thought before darkness took him was that he hoped Grant and Selene weren’t still being forced to watch.

He came to with his face pressed against the pale, blood-smeared marble. He got his arms under him, groaning as he wearily pushed himself up from the floor. He crouched there, wary, his coat a pool of blackness around him, and his eyes narrowed as he realized he’d been

tossed inside the mystic pattern of blood and the demon was watching him hungrily. Just to be sure, Kane reached out experimentally, tried to move his hand beyond the circle, and wasn't surprised to meet a smooth, hard, invisible barrier. Whatever came next, he was trapped here, as bound to this space as the demon.

"So what now?" he asked, and Nakh-Ahmen smiled mockingly.

"Do you know, I'm absolutely confident that you've already figured that out."

Kane glared. "You want me to fight you." Nakh-Ahmen nodded. "What if I don't?"

"Then the spell backfires. That'd kill you, this lot of incompetents—" He gestured at Montgomery and his henchmen, watching from beyond the circle. "—And, oh, a spell this size, say—everything in a ten mile radius?"

Kane grimaced. No choice. "Fine," he growled, rising to his full height, a menacing black shape against the candlelight. "Bring it on."

The Mage of Day was only just in time. By the time they had reached the coast, Grant had regained enough power to send the car hurtling out over the ocean at roughly the speed of sound. It could have been the speed of light, but the car would've disintegrated and he knew Kane would never forgive him. They'd reached daylight in minutes and Grant had spent precious time soaking it in, feeling it fill him and heal him like rain on parched earth. It was a process that couldn't be rushed, no matter how much he tried. He would need to be at full power.

But when he finally allowed himself to turn the car and let his gaze stretch across the miles, through hills and trees and walls, what he saw sent a lurch of panic through his gut—Kane, fighting for his life against a *thing* that only looked human.

The time it took to reach the shore again seemed forever, making sure both Selene and the car arrived in one piece. But then he was free of it, free to hurtle forward, racing the particles of light, racing to save his friend.

Grant blasted through both the stone walls and the shields of magic with a power that almost nothing could stop, popping Montgomery's dampening spell like a soap bubble, just as Nakh-Ahmen bashed a crushing elbow into Kane's skull. Kane went down, too disoriented to dodge. Grant caught the scything kick aiming for his head and hit Nakh-Ahmen with a burst of magical strength that sent the demon flying backwards to bounce off the barrier in a shower of golden sparks.

"Don't!"

Grant turned in surprise at Kane's belated shout. The demon was down, the mages scattering in panic. As far as he was concerned, the battle was over, apart from some mopping up, maybe getting Selene to deliver Montgomery to the magical authorities.

But Kane was staring at the fallen demon, his mouth set in the grim line that meant something had just gone horribly wrong.

"What is it?"

"I told you not to fight him," Kane reminded him. "Nakh-Ahmen learns from his opponents. Mimicry. We've only got a few moments before he'll be able to hit back just as hard

as you hit him.” Already the demon was stirring, trying to lift itself from the floor. “I hope you were holding back a little,” Kane added wryly.

“What’s he picked up from you?” Grant asked.

“Mostly Judo. So far.”

“So if we go entirely defensive...?”

But Kane shook his head. “Won’t work,” he said, and Grant’s heart sank. He hated when the charlatan used that tone of voice. “That’s the *other* problem.”

He didn’t get the chance to explain further. The demon was on his feet now, and came charging at them with all his newfound strength. Kane turned, grabbed, twisted, and Nakh-Ahmen went flying away again, his own momentum carrying him into the far side of the circle.

There was a harsh buzzing noise.

Kane screamed in agony, clutching at his neck as he staggered.

“Conroy! What—?” The Mage of Day reached to help his friend, but the magic assault—whatever it was—ended after only a second.

Kane was left panting, his eyes squeezed shut in pain. “I’ve used that move before,” he got out through clenched teeth. “Against the rules. And I’m running out of Judo.”

“Let me—“

“*No!*” Kane’s response was immediate and unequivocal. “We can’t take the risk.”

“But—“

“Grant, listen to me.” Kane’s voice was low and determined, and he held Grant’s gaze for a moment, compelling with a power that had nothing to do with magic. “You have to let me do this. I can figure out how to stop him.” He watched the demon slowly pick himself up. “You have to trust me.”

There was no time for Grant to argue, to think of a better plan—*any* plan. Nakh-Ahmen launched himself at Kane, and Grant had to force himself to stand back and watch what could only have been an uneven match even before he intervened.

This time, Kane wasn’t quick enough. He grunted explosively as the demon threw him against the barrier with all of *Grant’s* strength, like hitting a brick wall. Grant winced as he heard bones crack, but Kane somehow managed to land on his feet, and the breath of a whisper, “Wait,” kept the Mage of Day still on the sidelines.

“He’s got skills, I’ll give him that,” Nakh-Ahmen said conversationally to Grant, not even breathing hard as he continued the fight. “And I suppose hand-to-hand combat might be useful sometime.” He was grappling with Kane now, locked in close. A foot flashed and the charlatan fell backwards, hitting the ground with crushing force, the demon smashing down on top of him. He managed—barely—to flip the demon away again, but he had only a moment to recover before he was rolling desperately away from a vicious kick to the head.

But still the whispered command as Kane rolled to his feet and faced his enemy. “Not yet.”

Grant heard the whisper, his magically amplified senses keen enough to pick up the sound of light, but the demon either didn’t hear or didn’t care. “Of course, it isn’t really him I’m after,” Nakh-Ahmen continued. Grant winced as Kane was finally forced to abandon judo and

hit the demon with a solid punch. Nakh-Ahmen fell back for a moment, but there wasn't even a hint of pain in his voice as he went on. "You could save him if you took his place. I'd much rather fight the Mage of Day than a mere charlatan. If you take his place, he might survive. Otherwise..."

An explosive grunt of anguish, the sickening snap of breaking bone, the stutter of a powerful heartbeat—weakening. Kane hadn't dodged quickly enough. The demon's punch—with all of the charlatan's skill and the Mage of Day's strength—sent him flying across the magic circle. He slammed into the barrier with another agonized grunt and slumped to his knees, shaking. But still, the only words on his lips, "Not yet. Wait."

Grant's heart twisted within him, his hands closing into useless fists as he watched. He could *see* it happening. The eyes that could pick out a single grain of sand twenty miles away could *see* the horrible damage inside his friend's body—the broken fragments of ribs grating together, the seep and spurt of blood from internal organs and punctured veins. And he couldn't do anything—wasn't *allowed* to do anything—to stop it.

Nakh-Ahmen gazed appraisingly at the Mage of Day, waiting for a reaction. When it didn't come, he shrugged. "No? Oh well. His funeral." He turned back to finish his injured opponent.

But, like the demonmage guard before him, Nakh-Ahmen had made the mistake of taking his eyes off of Conroy Kane just a few moments too long. With a speed and grace that should have been impossible—that Grant knew must have taken every last ounce of strength—Kane leaped high into the air, using the invisible magical barrier to kick off from, and twisted like a pole vaulter right over the top of Nakh-Ahmen's head. He landed on his feet behind the demon,

and sparks of light seemed to fly from his fingers as he threw out one hand. The sparks resolved into throwing stars as they thudded into the demon's back, and then a crackle of electricity from the sharp bits of metal sent Nakh-Ahmen staggering. Kane was on him in an instant, hands wrapped around that human/inhuman neck.

Nakh-Ahmen actually roared with anger. His hands were like claws as he ripped Kane away from him and threw him down, face first into the floor. Blood erupted from the charlatan's nose and mouth, leaving yet another crimson streak on the marble as the demon's follow-up kick sent Kane skidding across the floor.

He slid to a jarring halt against the far barrier, tried to lift himself from the blood-smeared floor, and slumped back in gasping agony. That kick had cost him two more ribs and treated his spine like a whip. As the enraged demon advanced, it was all he could do to roll himself onto his back and watch it come.

And finally, *finally*, on a voice choked with pain, came the quiet word, "*Now.*"

Grant didn't even register as a blur, he moved so fast, and Nakh-Ahmen once again went flying backwards into the barrier as the Mage of Day stood protectively over Kane's body, eyes glowing with an angry fire.

There was a harsh buzzing noise.

Kane screamed, his battered body writhing in magical torment, almost drowning out Grant's shouted protest. "No! Stop it, he didn't—!"

“He bears the curse mark,” Nakh-Ahmen said reasonably, picking himself up. “So he gets the punishment. You’ve used that move before. How can I learn anything new if you keep doing the same things?”

Grant glared at him. “Right,” he said grimly. “This ends *now*.” He could see that the demon was already beginning to lose control, looking less human, letting more of his true nature show. “Conroy,” Grant muttered, “how do I stop this thing?”

Kane still hadn’t moved from the floor, and his answer was a strained whisper, but it came readily enough. “Unscrew his head and rip his heart out through his neck.”

“*What?!*”

“That’s not a real body. The head comes off. Six turns left.”

“Got it.” Grant sped to meet the charging demon, and soon Nakh-Ahmen was spinning, staggering dizzily as the Mage of Day whirled around him. “Now what?”

“Push down. Half turn left. Lift up.”

The demon’s head, barely human now, popped off and rolled across the floor with a gruesomely comical trundling sound, and Grant peered through the empty neck into the dark cavern of the chest, understanding now what Kane had meant. In the center of the chest, where the heart should be, was a large, multi-faceted crystal, glowing with a dull, sickly light. This was the demon’s brain, the memory crystal where he stored everything he learned from his opponents. Grant reached inside, grimacing, and yanked it free, sending the inert body crashing to the floor. A single burst of magic crumbled the crystal to dust, and Grant dropped the handful of sparkling powder to the floor beside its former body.

Kane still had not moved.

He lay stretched on the floor where he had fallen, in rigid stillness, his face as pale as the marble he lay on, his breath coming in shallow gasps, his heart beating so weakly that even Grant's magically enhanced hearing had to strain to pick it out. Grant knelt beside his friend, face lined with worry.

"I've got to get you out of here."

Kane groaned, almost a whimper of pain, as Grant lifted that broken body. It was a tiny sound; no one else might have heard it as Kane fought to keep it back. But Grant heard—just as he heard the grating of broken bones, saw the seep of hidden blood—and for the first time in his life, Grant cursed his own strength. Carrying the pain-wracked body in gentle arms, the Mage of Day walked carefully away from the magic circle, the guttering candles, the room of marble and red velvet. He only prayed that it wasn't already too late.

Selene pulled the sleek, black car to a halt just in time to see a figure in a tattered blue shirt emerge from the gaping hole in the manor's stone wall. Grant carried a dark bundle in his arms, walking slowly and carefully, and Selene's heart seemed to stop as she saw his expression. Grief. Rage. Pain. What had the demonmages done?

She reached his side in a shimmer of moonlight, anxiously noting Kane's bloody face, his shallow uneven breaths. At least he *was* still breathing, for the moment. For a second, she'd thought—

"We've got to get him to a hospital," she said, but Grant shook his head quickly.

“There’s no time,” he said, his voice strained with desperation. “He’s fading. He needs help *now*.”

“What happened to ‘the speed of light’?”

“I can’t. He’d never survive it. This much trauma, the acceleration would kill him.” He looked into her eyes, pleading, and she bit her lip as her normal confidence momentarily failed her. “Please, Selene,” Grant urged as he listened to Kane’s heartbeat growing steadily fainter. “You have to help him. He’ll die.”

Selene hesitated for only one second more. This was one of the powers of a moonmage that she’d never quite mastered. “All right. Let’s get him into the car,” she said finally. “I really wish we had a mindmage here, though. If I could link with you, see what you see...” She held the door open while Grant gently eased Kane in to lie flat along the back seat. “You know if I get this wrong, he could end up crippled for life.”

“I trust you,” Grant said firmly. “You can do this. Just enough to get him stabilized, enough to get him to a doctor. I’ll stop you if you go wrong.”

Selene climbed in and knelt beside Kane, her long fingers resting delicately on his shattered chest, and the silver glow of moonlight began to flow over his body. In the dark interior of the car, in the breathless stillness before dawn, pale light shimmered, and Kane’s face was a mask of sweat-slicked pain as the light inserted itself into his body to hold broken bones in place, to cover ruptured arteries, to reinforce the reluctant beat of the heart. His fists clenched, his lips drawing back in a snarl as he growled defiance at Death itself.

Finally, Selene looked up at Grant. “Drive,” she said, her eyes still slightly unfocused as she kept up the constant flow of magic to keep Kane alive. “Carefully,” she added.

Grant didn’t need telling twice. With one last worried glance at his friend, he put the car into gear and eased it onto the dark strip of pavement, scanning anxiously for potholes. The last thing Kane needed was a bumpy ride.

Kane woke as suddenly as always, fully aware both that he was in his own bed in his penthouse apartment and that he was not alone. He lay still, his breathing deep and steady, not even opening his eyes, waiting for further clues.

“Oh good, you’re awake,” said a familiar voice from the direction of the bedroom door. “Where do you keep the syrup?”

Kane’s eyes flew open. “*Grant?*” He sat up quickly—and then doubled over, choking back a groan as he clutched at his ribs.

“You all right?” Grant reached to steady him with a worried hand. “The doctor said there’d be some residual pain for a few days.”

“Grant, what’re you doing here?” Kane demanded, and then his brain caught up. “*A few days?*” he asked incredulously. “Grant, I had—I should’ve been in intensive care for at least—“

Grant shrugged. “Moonmages tend to speed things up,” he said. “But Selene said being healed so quick would take it out of you, so I’m making waffles. Syrup?”

Kane slumped back into his pillows. “She healed me.”

“You sound surprised.” Grant sat in a chair beside the bed.

“No, I just...Well, yes, a little. I know she doesn’t like to.”

“She didn’t have much choice,” Grant said, his eyes going dark with the memory. “You nearly died. You would have if she hadn’t been there.”

There was a short, awkward silence, full of thoughts without words.

“What’d you do with my boots?”

Grant blinked, confused. “What?”

“My boots. Where are they?”

“Under the bed, but you’re in no condition to—“

Kane wasn’t listening. He felt around until he came up with his left boot clutched in one hand. Quickly, he flipped open a secret compartment in the heel and pulled something out—a finger-sized splinter of black rock. He held it out to Grant.

“I figured you’d want this. The obsidian crystal. Picked Montgomery’s pockets when he wasn’t looking.” Grant took the crystal, staring at it like it might bite him. “Next time, be a bit more careful what kind of traps you walk into.”

Grant matched Kane’s gaze for just a moment, and then he laughed. “You can talk,” he said lightly. He handed the crystal back. “Here, you keep that. It’s probably safer with you anyway.” He got up and headed for the bedroom door. “Now are you going to tell me where the syrup is, or do I have to put jam on these waffles?”

A smile tugged at the corner of Kane's mouth as his hand closed over the black shard.

"You're cooking for me? Now I really am in trouble."

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